

Women  
and Aging

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Celebrating Ourselves



Ruth Raymond Thone



**The Haworth Press, Inc.**

## **WOMEN AND AGING: CELEBRATING OURSELVES**

Ruth Raymond Thone



### **SOME ADVANCE REVIEWS**

“Out of the experience of her own aging and that of friends, Ruth Thone has created a very solid, courageous and illuminating exposition, leading us relentlessly into the vortex of an issue which swirls around each woman whether she wishes it to or not. She gently nudges women toward taking their aging process in their own hands, urging them to honor who they are and relish the newness and freedom which the last third of their lives can provide, including humor, joy, forgiveness, and celebration.”

**Katherine P. Riddle, PhD**

Professor Emerita  
University of Nebraska

“Ruth Thone, with characteristic courage and honesty, writes from her own rich life experiences, from those of participants in her workshops on aging and values clarification, and her extensive literary background. Her interesting and well-written book is a radical invitation to women to take charge of the last third of our lives, with support and affirmation from one another, and thus create a society in which older women can become our authentic selves.”

**Sr. Adrian M. Hofstetter, PhD**

Coordinator, Home Sharing Opportunities, Ulster County  
Formerly Chaplain, Creighton University



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To that longtime friend who, as he laughingly and unwittingly suggested that he is growing old disgracefully, spoke the heart of my book.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Ruth Raymond Thone** is a writer, teacher, community activist, and speaker. She has been active in progressive politics for many years. Currently, she studies Spanish, records her dreams, travels to see her three grown daughters, and lives in Lincoln, Nebraska, with her husband Charles. She works at a House of Hospitality and a Soup Kitchen, is active in Common Cause, drug and alcohol abuse recovery, anti-war and peace groups, feminist causes, and leads groups in Values Clarification and Realization, Appearance and Aging Issues for Women, and Writing. She is a member of and active in several social justice organizations.

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## Preface

Old women are mostly invisible in our country. If not ignored, they are pitied, derided, discounted, or feared, unless they are in the socially-acceptable roles of caretaking, that of grandparent or dutiful daughter, or have managed to be considered wise, often because they are rich and/or famous.

We are afraid of aging, because of its powerlessness, its increasing body disabilities and malfunctions, its smells, its oddness, its inability to race around, be important, and to take care of itself. Such characteristics are present at any age, but especially scorned in the old. Our society fears old women because they represent death and disdains them because they are no longer useful, sexually or as caretakers.

In past ages, old women were looked on as wise, powerful, guardians of life's entrances and exits, healers, seers, and truth-speakers. Women's power was taken from them by church fathers, businessmen, university intellectuals, medical doctors, male undertakers, by a gradual, specific, purposeful decision and act of taking unto the male gender those occupations and activities done for ages by women. Inquisitions and witch-burnings are two of the most visible examples of a centuries-long process of taking from women, especially old women, their work, their power, any authority in life.

“There's an aging mystique in this country that is just as serious, and even more pernicious, than the feminine mystique,” says Betty Friedan. “It denies reality, and distorts it. It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy that keeps us from confronting the real possibilities and problems of the new third of life that is now open to people” (Svitil 1990, p. 74).

Pitiful and powerless as we are, is it not strange that old women are still hated and feared?

Who wants to read further?

We do, those of us who are sick and tired of being patronized, who want to add our collective weight and energy to redressing the balance, who refuse to accept our culture's lie that old is ugly. We want to reclaim for ourselves that last third of our lives, supported and affirmed by one another and the society we live in.

This is not a gerontological study, bolstered by statistics and footnotes, although many of the experiences related here can be found in the writings listed at the end of the book.

I tell the story of how some aging and old women are carving out a way of life, hacking their way through the nearly impenetrable undergrowth of our culture's revulsion against us, finding in each other's stories and shared experiences the courage to reclaim our equality not only with aging men, but with the youth so worshipped in this country. At first I wrote of "we" and "us." Reminded that I do not speak for all others, I have tried to avoid the editorial, inclusive and/or bombastic "we," which often results in awkward phrasing.

In the midst of my own aging process, a friend and I designed an hour's presentation to help participants get in touch with their aging concerns and find ways to face them. Later I expanded the work into an eight-week class, laced with the concepts and strategies I have studied and taught in Values Clarification/Realization work for a long time. Since then, I have led groups in churches, renewal centers, religious coalitions, and a community college so women can become conscious of their own aging process and that of the culture in which they live.

I am a white, middle-class woman, living and working in Lincoln, Nebraska, where people of color are less than three percent of the population. Even so, I can remember in the groups, a Native American woman, a woman of Spanish heritage, a differently-abled woman, a friend who is lesbian, and a young woman dentist who is Jewish. That is not much diversity; sometimes ethnocentrism is a reality. However, becoming aware of the oppression of old women has made me more aware of other oppressions, those of poor, lesbian, differently-abled women, and women of color. The work of social justice and peace has taken up much of my energy for the past 10 years, a special consciousness of my own aging years.

Nebraska authors Willa Cather, Mari Sandoz, and another favor-

ite woman writer, Elizabeth O'Connor, all tell us to write of what we know, of our own experience. I have done that, trying not to be insensitive to the concerns of women of different births, backgrounds, lifestyles, and circumstances.

Every page of this book was written intuitively, from my life, my experiences, my feelings. Thus the pattern may not be clear, nor each chapter perfectly organized nor of the same emotional intensity or clarity. It is simply the reflection of one woman's aging, made stronger and braver by reflections and life experiences of other women, both read and heard. The idea is to read and think, remembering and knowing your own story, seeing your own journey as worthwhile, making those choices appropriate to your own situation.

Many women have taken this journey before me, perhaps with less anger and concern about what one's culture says is appropriate. My focus is on the reasons we need and the ways we practice daily affirmative action in the face of subtle, deep, pervasive, unspoken distaste and derision for old people in general and old women in particular in the United States. If you think I exaggerate, please watch television carefully for several days and read some popular magazines.

This is a suggested pathway—books to read, things to do, matters to clear up, our lives to reflect upon and change—for living to old age and affirming ourselves every step of the way.

I understand that not all women have the choices available to me and the women I have worked with. Nor does celebration seem appropriate to women sick, poor, alone, mentally or emotionally disturbed, disabled, or helpless. These conditions can describe people at any age, yet are also often part of the life situation of old women. I'm convinced that as we work to change society's attitudes towards old women, we enlarge the possibilities and improve conditions for all women. It sounds trite to say that we must both respect the diversity of women and live in solidarity with each other, yet I think that is the truth of our lives—all women, whether they are of color, lesbian, poor, differently-abled, or white, middle-class, honoring our differences and hearing and respecting each other's stories and experiences.

The chapters in this living will are based on the areas of our lives

I have found we need to concentrate on, based on the life experiences of many women gathered in groups to reflect and work on their own aging. They are also based on the written work I have found that speaks directly to old women and their status today. Some of the best writing, I think, is by lesbian women, who, surely because of the oppression they know so well, see more directly and face more honestly the ageism in our culture and the very real aging concerns of all women.

I try to avoid giving advice—saying there is one way to feel or think or act—or age! We all have our deep-seated reasons for what we do. I especially try to avoid that shoal of advice that tells us to deny that there is anything wrong in our lives, to deny our feelings of sadness or grief or inadequacy, to smile, because our culture demands cheerfulness, extroversion, activity, or positive thinking.

The work comes directly from my need to record my own aging and the journey of hundreds of sisters through their aging years. It is offered to women wondering how to feel good about themselves, surrounded by all types of media that show images of thin, happy, well-coiffed and dressed, financially-secure, heterosexual-coupled, active, self-confident women.

Where are the real old women? They are everywhere if we would only look and care. We learn to care about ourselves as we age, not to wait until we are old-old, but to begin the journey now. This record is hardly complete; it is a starting place, a reminder to women of reflections and actions that will lead to affirming and celebrating ourselves now and whenever it is we think we are old.

Adrienne Rich (1985, p. 65.) says “The most important thing one woman can do for another is to illuminate and expand her sense of actual possibilities. . . .” This work is offered in that spirit.

*I. UNMASKING  
OUR OWN TRUTH  
AS AGING WOMEN*



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